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DEPARTMENT OF THE ARMY  
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IN REPLY REFER TO

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6 June 1968

SUBJECT: Senior Officer Debriefing Report: BG John H. Elder Jr.,  
Commander, 79th Engineer Group; Acting Commander, 20th Engineer  
Brigade; Deputy Commander, USAECAV; CG, 18th Engineer Brigade,  
Period 7 January 1968 to 3 May 1969 (U)

SEE DISTRIBUTION

1. Reference: AR 1-26, subject, Senior Officer Debriefing Program (U), dated 4 November 1966.
2. Transmitted herewith is the report of BG John H. Elder Jr., subject as above.
3. This report is provided to insure appropriate benefits are realized from the experiences of the author. The report should be reviewed in accordance with paragraphs 3 and 5, AR 1-26; however, it should not be interpreted as the official view of the Department of the Army, or of any agency of the Department of the Army.

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DEPARTMENT OF THE ARMY  
HEADQUARTERS, UNITED STATES ARMY VIETNAM  
APO SAN FRANCISCO 96375

AVHGC-DST

30 APR 1969

SUBJECT: Senior Officer Debriefing Report

Assistant Chief of Staff for Force Development  
Department of the Army  
Washington, D. C. 20310

1. Attached are three copies of the Senior Officer Debriefing Report prepared by BG John H. Elder, Jr. for the period 7 January 1968 to 3 May 1969 during which he served as the Commander of the 79th Engineer Group, Acting Commander of the 20th Engineer Brigade, Deputy Commander, USAECV and Commanding General, 18th Engineer Brigade.

2. BG Elder is recommended as a candidate guest speaker at appropriate service schools.

FOR THE COMMANDER:

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as(trip)

C. D. WILSON  
1LT, AGC  
Assistant Adjutant General

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## DEBRIEFING REPORT (RCS-CSFOR-74)

COUNTRY: Vietnam

DEBRIEF REPORT BY: Brigadier General John H. Elder Jr.

DUTY ASSIGNMENT: 7 Jan 68 - 3 Jul 68: Cmdr, 79th Engr Gp  
(8 May 68 - 20 Jun 68: Actg Cmdr, 20th Engr Bde)  
3 Jul 68 - 21 Sep 68: Dep Cmdr, US Army Engr  
Construction Agency, Vietnam  
21 Sep 68 - 3 May 69: Cmdr, 18th Engr Bde

INCLUSIVE DATES: 7 Jan 68 - 3 May 69

DATE OF REPORT: 15 Apr 69

1. A salient feature of the situation in South Vietnam, during the period covered by this report, has been the degree of access of governmental authority and normal commerce to large segments of the population and the countryside. In early 1968 both the railroads and the highway and secondary road systems had been heavily interdicted. For all practical purposes movement was limited to those routes required for continuing military traffic and to travel by aircraft between population centers large enough to support fixed wing airfields. Although military forces were able to enter virtually any area at will, commerce was stagnant and regular governmental services were limited to province capitals and other population centers. This situation provided fertile areas for VC attack on residual governmental authority and for assumption of control by the VC infrastructure. As US engineer effort has shifted from the development of bases and fixed facilities to the opening, rehabilitation and upgrading of the major highway system, ARVN and other GVN construction agencies have tended to follow suit, opening railways and secondary feeder roads in concert with the highway program. The expansion in the means for access to the countryside has been a vital ingredient in the acceleration of the pacification program and in the revitalization of intra-Vietnam commerce, agriculture and industry. In the long run, this may be the most important US Engineer contribution--second only to the construction of the facilities through which forces were deployed into Vietnam--to the success of the US undertaking in Vietnam.

2. Apart from its direct effect on the ability to move, the LOC program has resulted in other indirect benefits. Engineer units are deployed in company base camps all along the LOC system. These base camps have become magnets for the Vietnamese people. They provide relative security to surrounding areas. They provide employment. They provide a source of support for civic action projects. They provide cleared, tillable land.

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3. The LOC program is a source of intelligence data. Mine sweep teams and work parties, in daily contact with the Vietnamese, are major participants in the Volunteer Informant Program, providing payment on the spot for ordnance turned in and information provided. Interdiction and harassment patterns provide clues to VC movements and VC intentions. Changes in the attitudes of local inhabitants observed day-by-day furnish further evidence of the presence or absence of VC units and cadres.

4. The effectiveness of the GVN in developing the means to assume its proper role in the maintenance of the LOC system and in the opening of the feeder road net has been minimal.

a. In general, Ministry of Public Works plans have sought a relatively sophisticated level of capability--tractors, graders, paving equipment, and self-propelled rollers. A meaningful capability can be developed at a much lower level of sophistication--picks, shovels, hand tampers and asphalt kettles. In failing to develop those capabilities within its means, this GVN agency has been far too slow to make its presence felt and to relieve US forces of road maintenance burdens in areas under solid governmental control.

b. The Ministry of Public Works has suffered much from the expanded draft attendant on the expansion of the ARVN. It's skilled and trained people have been drained away to the detriment of its capability development. Many Engineer commanders have felt that the MPW should be patterned on para-military, if not fully military, lines as a means of more rapid increase in its effectiveness. Although I do believe MPW would be a more effective organization if structured on these lines, I recognize that the political and psychological impact if such an action might outweigh the immediate advantages.

c. ARVN Engineer units devote relatively little of their effort to LOC work. Except for isolated cases, the primary effort of ARVN Engineers is applied to base camps and fixed facilities. Their major contribution to LOC work has been the reconstruction of bridges. The major inhibiting factor to a major LOC effort appears to be a lack of an adequate equipment maintenance structure. A contributory factor is the lack of separate operational areas for US and ARVN units; the ARVN Engineer unit, feeling itself substantially inferior in horizontal construction capability, will defer to the US unit in its area. A second contributory factor is the ARVN Engineer slice, which is considerably smaller than that of the US; the relatively few lightly equipped ARVN Engineer units are stretched quite thin.

5. Psychological operations have been effective with the Vietnamese populace in support of the LOC program. Some units have made it a practice to disseminate leaflets and conduct loudspeaker broadcasts to outline the local goals of the LOC program, to explain the benefits of a successful program, and to elicit local support of the program. These units,

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generally, seem to have encountered less resistance from the local people and to have met with the greatest success in the Volunteer Informant Program.

6. Civic action projects have been undertaken in every area where troop units have worked on the LOC. These have included schoolhouses, village offices, roads, irrigation systems, churches, hospitals, land clearing, conduct of MEDCAPs, and distribution of various supplies. These have been quite productive in gaining the cooperation of the Vietnamese in the LOC effort assisting pacification, and benefitting the morale of the units involved.

7. Consistent progress has been made in programs designed to enhance the effectiveness of ARVN Engineer units. An initial approach of offering training and technical assistance to ARVN Engineer units proved to be largely ineffective; pride, perhaps, deterred the ARVN unit from soliciting help. Later programs stressed "affiliation" of US and ARVN Engineer units rather than "sponsorship" of the ARVN unit by the US unit and were much more effective. The primary emphasis in these later programs was on joint planning, shared work programs, and mutual support with each affiliate contributing to the whole. This has been quite successful; ARVN unit effectiveness is improving and substantially more work is being accomplished.

8. Coordination of effort has been difficult. The many agencies involved in a given area and their separate command lines and dissimilar organizational structures have required that particular attention be given this matter.

a. Within II Corps, all Brigade operations are fully coordinated at the Field Force/Corps Senior Advisor level. The Field Force commander, with his tactical command, CORDS, military advisory and zone coordination functions has been the primary source of work priorities. Engineer boundaries have been made to coincide with province boundaries and all LOC and civic action work within a province is fully coordinated with province officials through the Province Senior Advisor. Regular monthly coordination meetings are held between the Engineer unit designated as the principal Brigade point of contact in the province and the Province Senior Advisor. With the concurrence of the CG, II Corps, specific US and ARVN Engineer units are designated as affiliates, one to the other, and there is a regular exchange of liaison coupled with periodic planning meetings. Each major US command operating within the area is the specific support responsibility of a designated unit of the 18th Engineer Brigade, and regular meetings are held between the Engineer unit and its customer units. LOC operations are coordinated through the II CTZ Road and Bridge Committee chaired by II Corps with representation from all agencies, civilian and military, having a part in the LOC program. No successful program for coordination of ROKA/ARVN and US Engineer effort has yet been established. Although ROKA forces possess a not inconsiderable Engineer component, these units are directed from a higher level, and local coordination has been neither productive nor effective.

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b. Within I Corps, basic Engineer responsibility lies with III MAF and the 3d Naval Construction Brigade rather than the 18th Engineer Brigade. The primary mission of 18th Bde units in I CTZ is to provide Engineer combat and other operational support to Army forces (XXIV Corps and the Americal Division). At the same time, by agreement between USARV and III MAF, 18th Bde has undertaken a part of the I CTZ LOC program south of Quang Ngai. In providing the units to I CTZ needed for these tasks, there is available from time to time a residual engineer capability not needed to meet current operational support tasks. By agreement with 3 NCB, sanctioned by USARV and III MAF, these residual capabilities are declared to 3 NCB for commitment to Engineer tasks not within the basic 18th Bde charter. These arrangements, though informal, have worked satisfactorily. The key to this success has been close and continuous liaison between the 18th Bde agent in I CTZ (45th Engr Gp), Army unit staff Engineers, the III MAF Engineer, and the 3d NCB. Perhaps the most difficult obstacle to gaining an effective Engineer organizational relationship in I CTZ has been the differing terminology and support concepts between the Services. It has been found necessary to be quite precise and detailed in the planning phase in order to avoid subsequent misunderstandings at the operational level.

9. Base development planning in Vietnam has sometimes been expedient rather than orderly and progressive. The backbone of the system in use is the Installation Coordinator. The Installation Coordinator is generally the senior tenant unit commander on the installation and bears a heavy concurrent operational workload. Then-current operational pressures may influence significantly base development planning decisions and may lead to decisions which are adverse to sound, long term development. Some improvement in base development planning might occur if this planning were accomplished at a higher level where current operational pressures are less immediate.

10. Efficient use of Engineer troop resources in Vietnam has demanded planning lead times on the order of one year at the Brigade level. A considerable effort must be invested in the mobilization of the assets required to support a construction program. The limited construction seasons require that mobilization be carried-out in the off-season so that maximum use can be made of the favorable construction weather. Shorter term program changes, major shifts in priorities, or simple lack of early decisions can result in considerable wasted effort.

11. In the circumstances in which Engineer units have been employed in Vietnam, command information is particularly important to unit esprit and high morale. In a more conventional military environment, the soldier can relate his tasks easily and directly to military operations. However, an engineer unit in Vietnam will seldom have the breadth of perspective to appreciate the significance of its part in the total program to the US objectives. Attention by commanders, at all levels, to the information program pays large dividends.

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12. The policy of cross-branch officer assignments followed in Vietnam has enhanced the efficiency of Engineer units. These assignments have included AGC officers as Adjutants through the battalion level, Signal Corps officers as Communications Officers through the battalion level, a limited number of Ordnance Corps officers as maintenance officers and as A Company Commanders in Construction Battalions, a limited number of Quartermaster Corps officers as Unit Supply officers, and a limited number of Infantry and Artillery officers to serve as defense coordinators for these units assigned these responsibilities. Although the policy may have been adopted as an expedient solution to branch sustaining base imbalances, it is a sound policy from the standpoint of unit effectiveness.

13. In the counter-insurgency environment in Vietnam, Engineer units of all types require an infantry combat capability including organic mortars and trained forward observer personnel. Construction units designed to function in rear base areas are deployed alone in insecure areas on LOC construction missions. Given the training required, additional crew served weapons, and reinforced communications, these units are able to protect and sustain themselves against all but deliberate large unit assaults. This reduces the need to tie-down maneuver units to secure Engineer work camps and work parties and, in fact, enables the Engineer unit to contribute to pacification and security in a direct, tactical sense.

14. The policy of continuing CMMI and AGI in a combat environment in Vietnam has helped to maintain unit effectiveness at an unprecedentedly high level over a sustained period. It enhances professionalism and will help the Army maintain its effectiveness through the immediate post-hostilities time frame.

15. The Engineer organization employed in Vietnam, centralizing the control of Engineer assets in a single Engineer Command (or Engineer Troops)--Brigade--Group structure, has proven highly effective. The assignment of the highest priority to operational support work for the tactical forces has insured responsiveness to tactical force requirements; the mix of construction battalions and combat battalions in the groups has permitted the optimum tailoring of the work force to the tasks at hand; and the existence of a substantial sustaining work backlog has permitted full unit employment even during periods of low and fluctuating operational support need.

16. Experience has indicated that six months is too short a command tour in most cases. Although many officers are given command experience and are thereby "tested" as commanders under a short command tour policy, a major price is paid in loss of unit effectiveness and lack of continuity.

17. Present organizational concepts and procedures do not provide an adequate means for focussing critical Engineer logistical assets against

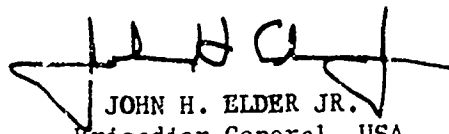
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areas of highest need. As a very minimum, the Engineer construction agency, to attain its maximum potential, must be able to control directly the construction supply and direct support maintenance assets available in support of its mission. In the present organizational structure, an excessively heavy effort is required to attain even a minimally acceptable level of coordination between Engineer units and supporting logistical activities, and, even so, cases continue to occur where critical assets are dissipated against relatively low priority needs.

18. Experience in Vietnam has indicated clearly the value of the direct support maintenance capability provided in the Construction Battalions; deadline rates in these units have remained consistently below those of the combat battalions and light equipment companies which possess no maintenance capability above the organizational level. Accordingly, I feel that a direct support maintenance capability should be provided the Engineer combat battalion and the light equipment company as a matter of priority.

19. The Rome Plow/Tractor combination has been a weapon of great value in operations in Vietnam. Area clearance techniques have denied the VC sanctuary and has provided clear areas for introduction of air mobile assault forces into areas of VC activity. Land clearing techniques have denied the VC the cover and protection needed for ambush operations and have thereby facilitated highway convoy operations and reduced security requirements for these operations. Additionally, land clearing has provided benefits in the pacification area through improved security and through the provision of clear land for refugee resettlement and related agricultural activity.

20. My duty in Vietnam has been the most rewarding and satisfying of my career. Apart from a pride in accomplishment, it has restored my faith in the American people. Never have I seen more dedication, ingenuity, courage, compassion, integrity, manhood, and professionalism displayed than that of the current generation of American soldiers. It has been a privilege to command them.

  
JOHN H. ELDER JR.  
Brigadier General, USA  
Commanding

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